

Planning theory and spontaneous social order theory: a mine field.

(a book by Stefano Moroni: *The spontaneous social order: knowledge, market and freedom after Hayek*, Utet, Torino 2005)

By Franco Archibugi[♥]

1. An intriguing book

This book deserves to be known and discussed by a wider international public; for this reason I accepted with pleasure the invitation by my colleague Bruce Stiftel to review it on *Planning Theory*, a Journal that, has for many years represented a kind of ‘critical conscience’ of the ‘urban planners’ profession, and has not yet extended beyond the bounds – to my regret – of the profession of ‘urban planners’ or (at most) of spatial planners¹.

What is surprising is that the author, one of the most clever and cultivated young Italian planning theorists, – whose background is urban planning and who

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¹This is due essentially – as well known – to the fact that in the anglosaxon semantics (actually hegemonic in the international and global cultural exchange) the words ‘*planner*’ and ‘*planning*’, *tout court*, already include the concept of town or urban/spatial planning; whereas in order to identify any other substantive planning, even non spatial, a specific adjective (economic, social, national, corporate, regional, urban, and so on) must be added. This is different to what occurs in other languages (for instance those of Latin origin, like Spanish, French, Italian, or even German) where the adjectivation of the word corresponding to *planning* is obligatory to make the substantive part intelligible; and where anyhow in urban and spatial planning others words are used and preferred whose origin is rooted in the concept of city and not in that of a plan (like *urbanisme*, *aménagement du territoire* (French) *urbanistica* (Italian and Spanish); *stadtbau*, *raumordnung*, (German).

For this reason, I have sustained for a long time, that it would be opportune to follow – as a professional and almost deontological rule - the conventional common English-based semantics; including therefore some *neologisms* in different languages. Practically, this would implicate:

1. that in *all languages* the respective word for planning (*planification*, *planificacion*, *pianificazione*, *planung*), should be used for any type of planning; with a possible specific adjectivation in the case of substantive applications (urban, regional, corporate, health, educational, environmental, financial, transport, touristic and so on); abandoning, in the case of urban and spatial planning any use of different words in all languages;
2. that, on the contrary, in the English language, the use of the word *planning* should be reserved for any kind of general planning (abandoning the implicit meaning for the town or spatial planning alone); and qualifying it with an adjective when necessary (as said above).

It would not be bad if this effort to unify the glossary could happen concurrently with that restauration, and reorganization, of the culture of planning, based on a true meta-disciplinary (I indeed would prefer to call it ‘neo-disciplinary’) integration and unification of methods and processes; restauration to which I have been committed for a long time. ì [Archibugi, 1992, 1994, 2003].

teaches in one of the most respected engineering and architecture departments in Italy - after a few works dedicated to the implementation of the land-use plans [Moroni, 1997, 1999] - has chosen as basis of his methodological, theoretical and philosophical reflections the opus of an economist of the past century, F.A. von Hayek, well known and much discussed among economists (to the point of having been awarded, in 1974, a Nobel prize); but who is – as all theoretical economists – less known among urban planners (and particularly among Italian urban planners who, nearly all, have architecture and engineering school backgrounds).

Already with this choice², independently from the result of his work, Moroni places himself at the *core* of an ‘integrated’ or ‘unified’ approach to planning. That is an approach which – although strongly recommended in the sixties and seventies of the past century³ - did not find the appropriate *methodological* developments within the *planning theory* movement, in order to avoid and overcome the fragmentation of different disciplinary branches of planning and the barriers between cultures and practices inspired or belonging to each of the disciplines (as I tried to explain in a recent apposite booklet⁴)

But even more surprising is the fact that Moroni, in order to take an ‘integrated approach to planning, has chosen precisely a thorough exegesis of the complex opus of an economist, whose own scope is meta-disciplinary as well (both from methodological and philosophical-political viewpoints) , and whose entrance in the field – as follower of one the most important schools of economics, ‘the wiener school’- is marked by a radical criticism of any sort of planning, of any kind. A total criticism developed on all planes: that of methodology, politics and even social ethics and philosophy. A criticism which, in negative terms, succeeds in unifying and integrating different substantive planning approaches, well before planning scholars and promoters could do it themselves, in positive terms.

What is the result of such an impressive and superior intellectual effort?

What use can the planning theorist make of it?

² I mean that the choice on behalf of a town-planner to study the work of an economist on a subject that concerns essentially psycho-social implications constitutes by itself a testimony of an integrated approach to planning!

³ In those years the request for an integrated approach to planning was very strong and was coming from the higher levels of international guidance and responsibility in the United Nations system. Personally I seize any opportunity to reminisce about it among younger scholars of planning theory just to keep alive the memory of a program, that later was among the most neglected in the evolution of professional and theoretical planning. The United Nations dedicated to it on more than one occasion Resolutions of the General Assembly [1970 e 1975] and of the Economic and Social Council. Several other agencies of the UN family worked on the ‘unified approach to planning’, in particular the UNDP, which manages the general financial fund of UN projects, mainly under the profile of the evaluation techniques and methods. However two minor UN agencies worked specifically on the ‘unified approach to planning’, and with interesting results: the UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) with offices in Geneva, and the Centre for Housing, Building and Planning, with headquarters at the General Secretariat in New York, later transformed into the UN Center for Human Settlements (Habitat), with offices in Nairobi. About the most significant work on this matter see [UNRISD, 1970, 1975, 1980; and UN-Center for Housing, Building and Planning, 1975].

⁴ Published only in Italian [2003], and I hope to soon find a publisher for English. Moroni wrote a review of it in *Planning Theory*.

The feat of answering these unavoidable questions is not easy. And I doubt that it can be accomplished in a review of a few pages. Reserving myself the option to come back again on the subject more extensively, I will try however to supply an essential answer to the two questions above, preceding them with a concise exposition of the structure and development of the book.

2. The book's structure and development

According to Moroni, the most interesting contribution that von Hayek gave to the political-economic reflection is the deepening of the concept of 'spontaneous order' applied to socio-economic life. A 'spontaneous order' – says Moroni – 'is an order whose elements, under certain conditions, *self-organize*.

From the beginning, Moroni affirms that 'the surprising aspect of the phenomenon is that orders of a spontaneous nature afford, in many cases, results incomparably superior to those of deliberately constructed and guided orders.' It is a strong affirmation, which however it is not entirely clear.

Should such an affirmation be understood as a postulate pertaining to the entire research project? That is, should it be considered an assumption that guides the research project rather than a result of the project? Should it be taken as an *a priori* evaluation? Or should it be taken as the expected result of the book, the conclusion the reader will reach on finishing the book?

Moreover, since spontaneous social order is the topic of the book, that affirmation, formulated in such a way, first of all, in the first lines of the book makes one ask oneself what meaning to attribute to the words 'in many cases': is this in a majority or minority of cases? Because, if it is in a majority of cases, it would mean that spontaneous order is to be preferred, as it would give results incomparably superior to those of a constructed or guided order; otherwise the contrary would be true! Should it be assumed that the author intends that normally – by an *a priori* evaluation that the book will justify or argue – spontaneous order is *always* to be preferred over constructed or guided order?

Nevertheless, aside from the way in which spontaneous social order is to be evaluated, so as to avoid pleonasm, (on which Moroni, as well, declares immediately that there is more to delve into and clarify) he tackles the problem of spontaneous order, formulated various times by von Hayek, from three points of view:

1. that of '*social methodology*', asking oneself the essential question: *what epistemological and methodological perspective is appropriate to understand the phenomenon of spontaneous order?*;

2. that of '*social theory*', asking oneself the essential question: *what characteristics must a theory of spontaneous order have in order to convincingly account for 'particular socio-economic phenomena'?*;

3. that of '*social philosophy*', with the essential question: *what (ethical, political and judicial) normative perspective can be the counterpart of the explanatory theory of spontaneous social order?*

Moroni devotes a first Part to an organic reconstruction of von Hayek's thought, focusing on the answers to the three questions above. In a second part – adopting the same symmetrical division of the three chosen points of view – he develops an extensive and deep line of reasoning on:

1. which aspects of the explicative theory of spontaneous order (of Hayek) are 'truly relevant';
2. which methodological assumptions are 'actually indispensable' to formulate it;
3. what relationship does this theory have with an appropriately integrated 'liberal' public ethic.

In this second Part – obviously the most substantial and innovative of the book – Moroni develops his deep-seated conviction (postulate or his conclusive thesis?) that 'Hayek indicated the right path, but that in many aspects it is necessary 'to go beyond'. And in this Part Moroni outlines the paths along which *to go beyond*.

On the methodological plane Moroni – although he feels that Hayek's social methodology has doubtless validly demonstrated the 'limits of our possibilities in understanding, explaining and foreseeing complex social phenomena' and accepting in the meantime Hayek's pleading against reducing sociology to mere psychology – asserts that Hayek has none the less 'left completely unresolved the problem of methodological individualism' (that seems, in any case, abandoned – says Moroni – by the later Hayek as well). Thus, abandoning the methodological individualism approach (widely adopted and sustained to the present day by a relevant part of social and political sciences scholars) Moroni develops what he himself defines as an 'intermediate position' between methodological individualism and its opposite complement, social 'holism', (this too with quite a solid albeit debatable tradition of thought behind it).

Moroni calls his own intermediate position '*methodological situationism*'. His lines of reasoning are extremely interesting, and deserve to be laid out, analyzed and debated well beyond the bounds of a book review.

Moroni expresses his conviction that the theory of spontaneous social order is still a useful basis of social theory (provided that it is circumscribed and specific – as he himself notes in the first part of the book – 'so as not to cause the concept of spontaneous order to lose meaning and explanatory force'). Still on the topic of social theory, Moroni does not find convincing the way another theory advanced by the same Hayek:[1978, 1979] the *theory of the spontaneous evolution of institutions*, was 'joined' to the first theory, of spontaneous social order.

Finally on the plane of 'social philosophy' (moral, political, judicial, for which I would prefer simply the term of social policy, leaving philosophy not be involved...) Moroni approves of the fact that through the theory of spontaneous social order one builds 'a solid foundation of social theory for the liberal perspective'. And this would free it of the accusation of not being able to support a certain level of 'distributive justice'. But one might ask oneself – quite appropriately – if this foundation can guarantee that the problem of distributive justice is 'as irrelevant in a liberal perspective' as Hayek believes.

After following a series of lines of reasoning that involve many authors known for their criticism of ‘distributive justice’ (Robert Nozick and Hayek himself along with other less known authors)⁵ – lines of reasoning that deserve to be known – Moroni rather unexpectedly concludes however, after so many efforts and subtle differentiations, that the ‘only relevant criticisms are still certain criticisms originated in socialist milieus’. And he identifies their two principal aspects: 1) that radical liberalism does not perceive material inequality as a lack of value per se; and 2) that, anyway, it does not seek guarantees that all may have a dignified living standard.

Moroni thus initiates a sort of criticism of liberalism trying to introduce a vision (‘theory’ or ‘philosophy’?) that counters those criticisms ‘assessing if and how liberalism can push itself beyond the ‘minimum state’, that is always the underlying utopic ideal of the pure liberal theory, but also the vision that has always clashed with the evolution of the historical reality of advanced contemporary societies, never being able to abide by those ‘pure’ ideals.

One cannot in fact overlook that during the past century, with the development of the Welfare State,⁶ - the State has come to play a preponderant role in economic and social life (in quantitative terms starting from a 10% of the wealth produced at the beginning of the century to 50% at the end of the century); and, furthermore, that it was introduced, in its history, more often by conservative or liberal governments than by socialist governments. Nor can one overlook the fact that the overwhelming growth of this role was accompanied by the most fabulous development pace ever attained by humanity in its entire history. The increase in the role of the State precisely in the more advanced liberal democracies with higher income is the historical proof that in the end it does not produce those devastating effects on economic and social development that many assert nor on the standards of political and economic freedom, of which humanity today is enjoying the highest levels ever attained, in the Welfare State nations and as never in its history.

Moroni therefore arrives – starting from scenarios different from the ones of those who don’t believe in the almost ‘sacred’ virtues of the theory of unintentionality and of the philosophy of the naturalness of competition and of utilitarianism – at a form of liberalism (that he denominates ‘active’) that reaches political conclusions that in the end are not very dissimilar from those of traditional opponents of classical liberalism, the socialists. Those same socialists who analogously – from their end and in the opposite direction – have corrected the rigidities of a socialism too strongly focused on the principles of methodological holism and of the ‘Ethical State’.

But what does this active liberalism consist in?

⁵ The most significant works of the mentioned authors concerning their criticism of ‘distributive justice’ are : v.Hayek [1976] and Nozick,[1974].

⁶ In Great Britain the first Welfare State plan (the well-known Beveridge Report ‘plan’) was signed in 1942 by an outstanding and influential liberal politician, Lord Beveridge. Many hints of a liberal vision open to incorporating a distributive justice can be found in a little known pamphlet by Lord Beveridge : *Why I am a Liberal*, [1945].

Moroni sums it up in two concepts: 1) basic liberties and 2) a basic standard of living for all. This form of liberalism – says Moroni – is founded on two pillars. First, on a ‘descriptive concept of the (market) society as a spontaneous order’ (and here everyone agrees). Secondly ‘on a normative conception of (public) institutions which attribute a priority and fundamental role to the defense of individual freedom, but accepts the idea that every citizen must be guaranteed a basic standard of living in terms of the vouchers and/or resources necessary to access certain fundamental services (for instance health care) and subsistence goods (for instance food and clothes)’. Thus, he thinks of a liberal theory of the State which is founded on two essential constitutional principles; a ‘first overriding fundamental principle that protects a set of individual negative freedoms (which he calls ‘*liberty principle*’) and a ‘second integrating principle that seeks a minimum basic standard of living for all’ (which he calls ‘*security principle*’).

Furthermore he qualifies this active liberalism by eight criteria or guidelines:

1. the threshold to refer to, so as to guarantee to all the elementary means, must be set by reasoning in absolute and not relative terms;
2. the basic standard of living must be established in minimal terms;
3. it is necessary to grant maximum space to the market;
4. any state monopoly in the services sector must be avoided
5. severe process constraints must be established
6. the greatest space must be granted to individual freedom and responsibilities
7. a concept of *distributive justice* that is fundamentally ‘*structural*’ (and not ‘*structuring*’) must continue to be accepted. (on this point a clarification is needed because the author’s text is not fully comprehensible);
8. the government should only grant a form of ‘*cold solidarity*’ (this term expresses perhaps neutrality towards the differing values among citizens and that it is not the government’s task to define; counter-posed to a ‘*warm solidarity*’, left to private initiative, through the ‘independent sector’ i.e. the non-profit associationism sector, and so on).

3. Some comments

In the last chapter of the book, dedicated – as mentioned earlier – to a revision of Hayek’s theories and of the support given by it to a social philosophy of liberalism and its updating and renewal, Moroni gives free reign to a true policy ‘manifesto’. As often happens to those with one foot in theoretical elaboration and the other foot in practical life, one runs the risk, in the methodological and theoretical analysis to dwell too much on lines of reasoning, (caught in the dialogic and dialectic gears of thought); whereas on the contrary one runs the risk in identifying operational criteria and practical policies, to be too hasty and schematic; and to be lacking in illuminating references to the possible concrete case history in which those criteria and politics should be applied, summarily outlined in the ‘manifesto’.

This is why in the final and conclusive part of Moroni's book, the reader could use more operational examples of the eight criteria and principles listed above. It is to be hoped that in his future work, Moroni will be able and willing to dedicate himself to this as well.

I do not know if what I am about to say is due to possible personal biases, but – granted the positive judgement on the 'scientific' value of the work and of the reflection developed from it – I remain with the impression that the 'active liberalism' that Moroni champions, and that all considered represents a 'going beyond' the classical radical liberalism (in which it seems that, according to Moroni, Hayek has remained, in many aspects, entangled), does not arrive very far from thought (of a socialist imprinting) which has been widely manifested and is still now being manifested in all advanced countries under the banner of '*reinventing the left*'⁷ (in the European socialdemocratic parties, in the anglosaxon world's 'new labor' and in the American 'liberal' tradition). That 'revision' of socialism that (after so many revisions of the past carried out in connection to mutations that the socio-economic structure was going through) even today, the 'neo-socialists' (let me call them so) try to carry out in order to take into account the ongoing transformations in our contemporary society⁸.

Summing up, it seems to me that the supporters of an *active liberalism 'à la Moroni'* (and there are many among scholars), can easily meet the supporters of a *liberal socialism*, that is, of an approach based on the passage from a *Welfare State* to a *Welfare Society*, [Archibugi 2000 and also Abrahamson 1988, 1989] that is with 'less State', less bureaucracies, less direct management, more operational flexibility and competitive approach even among public structures (that are today no less 'pluralistic' than the individuals or corporations of the traditional market mechanisms), and however, at the same time, with a more marked presence of the State in the coordination and planning of societal political goals (nowadays scarcely considered) with greater verification and coordination in the management of single programs, by means of ever more advanced forms of simulation and gauging of the effects of any decision whether public or private.

In fact I don't see why the *background* of a policy of maximum freedom for the private initiatives of the personal and group invention and creativity, research and innovation, should be necessarily the 'theory of the spontaneous social order' and that of the 'un-intentionality' of events or effects.

⁷ It is the title of a well known book edited by David Miliband [1994], formerly chief of the political office of the opposition leader and presently member of the British Government. A large group of scholars cooperated on the book oriented according to this expression. The book was defined by *The Economist* 'a mine of new interpretation of the concepts of community, citizenship, participation, civil society and democracy'.

⁸ I refer obviously to the transformations of *Capitalism*, from its origins to its first characteristics in the XIX century, to *Neo-capitalism* developed in the XX century, to the *Late capitalism* that some historians have associated with the post-industrial and information society [for instance Mandel, 1975], and to that which I would define as *Post-capitalism* which has been not yet sufficiently described from a historical-scientific point of view (to know more about it see [Archibugi, 2000]). To each of these 'stages' of Capitalism has corresponded a sort of 'revision' of the scope and policies of Socialism. And I believe that this did and will happen even in the field of the classical Liberalism, to which we can attribute the origins of Moroni's active Liberalism.

This background could also be provided by those ‘theories of societal programming’, [Mannheim, 1950, just to remember a ‘father’ of this strand] based on which an intelligent and programmed simulation of the outcomes, along with a systematic cooperation and negotiation with the organized stakeholders, and endowed with the ready availability and use of modern and ever more sophisticated decision making tools, could assure a much faster and easier application of public decision making. Thus one could avoid dysfunctions, misinformation, ignorance, errors, inconsistencies, incongruities, useless conflicts, contradictory and chaotic solutions, all things deriving from not controlling the possibility and feasibility of the decisions themselves. And at the same time one could avoid the risk of wild competition and of the excessive power of the strongest: all of which seem to me no less dangerous for freedom than planning studies...

As to the overall development of the book, one may ask oneself: is it necessary to start off from an a priori assumption or postulate of the theory of the spontaneous social order, based in its turn, on ‘methodological individualism’ (in all its multiple definitions and facets) or – alternatively also on its opposite ‘methodological holism’, in order to formulate societal goals – in the forms most respectful of the rights of individuals, families and groups that compose society and in putting to use tools and methods of action that are respectful of the rights above?

Is it necessary – in order to defend an ‘active’ liberal approach (and why not call it – to please everybody – a liberal-socialist approach) – to espouse the theory of the ‘invisible hand’ or that of spontaneous order (whose differences, sustained by Hayek, seem to me irrelevant in the perspective that we are adopting)?

Reversely, is it quite necessary to reject the vision of those scholars – like myself – who sustain that the misdeeds of the ‘invisible hand’ – also called ‘market failure’ – are also ‘invisible’, whereas those of the ‘visible hand’ are – on the contrary – quite visible? (This is the reason to which we owe that the *ex post* results of the invisible hand appear to many people ‘incomparably superior’ to those of the ‘visible hand’⁹.)

And going on: is it really necessary to believe in the unquestioned virtue of the market and the unmitigated vices of public or government intervention (or vice-versa) if we simply intend to formulate a policy which seeks to ‘optimize’ case by case – any given situations, circumstances, constraints, bounds, relative presences of private or public forces, etc..? All this has the goal of optimizing for maximum results and minimum damage possible generated by the market, by competition, and by the respect for excessive personal economic freedom; and concurrently with the goal of optimizing for maximum effectiveness and minimum waste and bureaucratic overload possible generated by the intervention and by the interposition of public political institutions.

Moreover one has the impression that the emphasis lent by the author on some indispensable theoretical premises in order to apply ‘something more’ than the

⁹ Without considering how one can hope to carry out an ex post comparative assessment between two cases applied to the same reality!

standards of ‘minimum government’, are not particularly in line with the critical position assumed by the same author in respect to Hayek’s unequivocal adherence to methodological individualism, when he qualifies his own position as that of ‘methodological situationism’. It is probable that I may have misconstrued the thinking of the author when he speaks of ‘methodological situationism’, but let me take the opportunity to say how much this expression diverges from the traditional approach denominated ‘methodological individualism’.

‘Situationism’ cannot not leave aside the theoretical background of spontaneous social order, because ‘situationism’ introduces a contention of historicalness, of circumstantiality, of relativism which does not need to be founded on a positivist ‘explanation’ (or theory). Situationism confronts problems *hic et nunc*; and this can be the common starting basis for both individualistic methodologists and for public holisticists; both for who seeks a certain ‘public interest’ and a certain ‘distributive justice’, as for the champions of ‘minimum government’.

They will confront each other not on the field of their reciprocal ideologies but rather on the field of the problems to be faced, if they will be capable to face them free from both a methodological and an ideological (theoretical) bias. And the field of ‘problem solving’ is methodologically quite different from methodological individualism but is closer to that which Moroni calls methodological situationism.

The great wall which divides, - methodologically and let me say also epistemologically - individualists and holisticists on one side and the situationists on the other is the approach to analysis: from the former an *ex post* analysis (i.e. positivist approach) and from the latter an *ex ante* analysis (i.e. programming approach).

The first oriented to drawing out from the *ex post* analysis the secrets and the laws of human and social behaviour (whether spontaneous or ‘constructed’) in order to use them in the perspective and the policies regarding the future.

The second, oriented to drawing out pragmatically, from the *ex ante* analysis the objectives and the constraints of the situation, feasibility and coherence of courses of action called for by possible choices and solutions regarding the future. In this last sense, it is my conviction that planners should all adhere to the concept and method of methodological situationism held dear by the author¹⁰!

4. The methodological situationism and the planning theory

It is exactly in this sense that Moroni’s work could take on an important meaning for the development of a true theory of planning. It could cover an area, that I would define as epistemological, which has not yet been well examined to my knowledge¹¹.

¹⁰ If I have understood correctly the meaning attributed to this term by the author. Otherwise, that interpretation would deserve to be further and completely developed, as described above.

¹¹ The works of Faludi [1986 e 1987] have never been studied enough and are an exception – to my knowledge. Furthermore another essay deserves to be mentioned, because it approaches the

From the beginning Moroni's work has been recognized as relevant as it finds its place, in its constitutive elements and interests (albeit – as we have seen – with a position critical towards planning in general), in the less frequently covered area of *integrated planning*, (trans-disciplinary, meta-disciplinary or 'programmatic'). Whereas the development of planning theory, in spite its promising beginnings in terms of methodology and therefore in terms of multidisciplinary integration (Faludi, and others), has not succeeded in leaving the main mono-disciplinary area of spatial planning (urban and regional).

At the conclusion of the presentation of this book, which is substantially a book on methodology, I would like to say that Moroni's book could become very significant for the re-launching in correct terms, of the methodological trans-disciplinary debate. This, however, on the condition that such a debate could be capable of freeing itself of assumptions that I defined as 'ideological'; and would be willing to deepen its declared methodological 'situationism' within the framework of the *programmatic approach* and consequently abandoning the 'temptation' of its misleading positivist drift.

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question from a new viewpoint, that of a Hungarian planner [Faragó 2003]. Outside the 'planning theorists' milieu, the operational research and decision theory scholars have approached this kind of methodological problem with a rich literature. For instance I appreciated the work of Michalos [1978], and a book that came out of a Seminar held at IIASA [Rolfe Tomlinson and Istvan Kiss, eds, 1984].

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